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April 26, 2013

Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related Agencies
129 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment and Related Agencies
190 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Reed and Ranking Member Murkowski:

As the subcommittee begins consideration of a FY 2014 appropriations bill, I write in support of two key priorities for my state of Colorado. First, I ask you to provide additional funding this year for wildfire prevention, suppression and mitigation efforts. And second, I ask you to ensure that two programs of particular importance for rural Colorado, the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) programs, have sufficient resources in the coming fiscal year.

While I understand you face challenges in allocating limited dollars across programs, we know that targeted investments to prevent, treat, and recover from wildfires are not only vital for protecting people, property, and infrastructure, but will also save us money in the long run.

In 2012, Colorado experienced the two largest and most devastating wildfires in state history, the High Park fire and Waldo Canyon fire. Throughout the 2012 season, wildfires in Colorado raged across more than 200,000 acres of land, destroyed hundreds of homes and other structures, forced thousands of evacuations, and killed six Coloradans. Nationally, in the past 50 years, the six worst wildfire seasons have occurred since 2000, indicating that both the frequency and severity of wildfires are increasing. Because the current funding levels for Forest Service fire preparedness and suppression efforts have been based on a 10 year running average, annual demand for funding has regularly exceeded appropriated amounts.

We also need more funding to make sure that wildfires are quickly contained and suppressed when they do break out. Fire suppression relies on a robust combination of firefighters on the ground and air support, yet the federal commitment in this area is also dangerously underfunded. The current average Forest Service aircraft is more than 50 years old, and the fleet of available aircraft has plummeted over the past decade. The Forest Service needs funding to modernize its air tanker fleet in order to prepare for large-scale fires in the coming years. Targeted dollars for suppression efforts, like preparedness and mitigation funding, ultimately pay for themselves many times over.

Finally, on a separate topic that is also of great importance to Colorado, I hope the subcommittee will consider extending resources for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) initiatives. These programs are vital lifelines for rural communities and businesses that are financially struggling to recover from the recession. PILT and SRS compensate counties for federal land that cannot be a source of property taxes or generate other revenue for the county. As other revenue sources for these critical programs have dried up in recent years, counties are relying even more heavily on the PILT and SRS to carry out basic municipal functions like maintaining roads and paying teachers. It is my hope that the subcommittee will provide robust funding for PILT and SRS in the Interior appropriations measure, so that Colorado communities will continue to have the support they need from these programs.

I look forward to working with you to ensure sufficient funding levels to fully fund PILT and SRS, and to effectively prepare for, mitigate against and suppress wildfires that destroy property and lives in Western states like Colorado.

Thank you for your leadership and for your attention to these issues as you turn your attention to appropriating funds in the coming fiscal year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M. F. Bennet", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator